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THE DEMISE OF THE TRIBE IN EDITH WHARTON'S OLD NEW YORK:

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF

THE HOUSE OF MIRTH AND THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Nancy Z. Fitch

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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ABSTRACT

The Age of Innocence, Edith Wharton's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, was published in 1920, fifteen years after The House of Mirth. It depicts the pinnacle of New York society in the seventies with great accuracy and many suggestions of the people of Wharton's youth in New York. Perhaps as a result of the upheaval in her life during World War I, Edith Wharton turned to an earlier age for the setting of the novel, one in which the influence of the newly rich is peripheral. The similarities between The Age of Innocence and The House of Mirth lie in the author's pictures of society and in her choice of a social captive as central consciousness. Both Lily Bart and Newland Archer struggle for sexual, aesthetic and moral freedom within elaborately constructed social cages. While Archer remains within the social web and creates a dull but respectable life for himself, Lily dooms herself to exile. The distinction in their fates is largely attributable to the power of the Family, so overwhleming an influence on Archer and so absent from Lily Bart's rootless existence. May Archer, with her "Dianaesque" beauty and her commitment to husband and home, is the repository of traditional values which keep Archer "in his place." Viewed from the perspective of the Seventies, Lily Bart is a holdover from the earlier era with an antique sense of honor, a victim of social change as much as of poverty or individual malevolence. Though the innocence of the earlier generation is purchased with individual freedom, Edith Wharton considered this sacrifice to tribal authority to be noble and necessary to the preservation of beauty and taste.

THE DEMISE OF THE TRIBE IN EDITH WHARTON'S OLD NEW YORK:

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF

THE HOUSE OF MIRTH AND THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

The writings of Edith Jones Wharton span six decades and two continents, ranging from books on travel and interior design to poetry, short stories, and novels. Like her contemporary Henry James, she chose the expatriate life, living almost exclusively in France after 1908. But it was in her native land--the "Old New York" of her childhood and youth--that she found the subject most suited to her ironic imagination. James had counseled her to "Do New York," and in returning to a matter in which she was steeped from her earliest days, Wharton obeyed both James' and her own first precept: that the novelist deal with that which is within his grasp. Two of her major novels, The Age of Innocence and The House of Mirth, reveal New York, both the old tribal structure of her youth and the later, more frivolous turn-of-the-century society, from the point of view of a social captive. Newland Archer and Lily Bart desire to transcend the sexual, aesthetic, and moral limitations society has established, but they are thwarted by the elaborate social webs that surround them. Though The Age of Innocence (1920) was published fifteen years after The House of Mirth (1905), the later novel depicts an earlier generation--the "Old New York" (the working title for The Age of Innocence) of the Seventies, the society into which Wharton made a stunning debut at the age of seventeen. In The House of Mirth, a wittier but much darker novel, the pyramid of social prominence has been scaled by unprincipled and wealthy interlopers;

the fabric of society which nurtured Wharton's youth with scarcely a pulled thread is nearly broken down, and the remnants are sterile and ineffectual. Newland Archer's generation is the last of the old order. The differences between his world and Lily Bart's are vast, and the times are crucial in the failure of each character to escape his artfully constructed prison.

The role of New York society in the suppression of Lily Bart and Newland Archer has inspired much fruitful critical analysis. Certainly these protagonists share a common frustration and isolation from their social set. Yet the society of The Age of Innocence which subtly and decorously closes ranks around the threatened May Archer, though exclusive and manipulative, is not the carnivorous and pleasure-seeking society which feeds on Lily Bart's beauty and delicacy, only to discard her when she is no longer useful. Newland Archer's social world is held together by ties of blood; Lily Bart's varied companions are linked by greed, financial obligation, and illicit personal relationships. The family, or the "tribe" as Edith Wharton refers to it in The Age of Innocence, is a powerful entity that determines the course of Archer's life. Twenty-six years later, however, it exerts no apparent influence on his son, and what remains of the family in The House of Mirth only serves to destroy Lily Bart. The cost to society of this demise, Wharton implies, is great. "Old New York is obviously not a satisfactory social order, but it is a social order," comments Gary Lindberg in Edith Wharton and the Novel¹ of Manners. Lily Bart, the waif-like orphan, is an appropriate

symbol of the next generation in which manners, the subtle indicators of morality as well as of taste, are discarded in the scramble for material gratification and social prominence. At the highest level of social intercourse, family and duty, the preeminent features of Newland Archer's world, have gone under, and the result, in Edith Wharton's eye, is disastrous.

The absence of family influence in The House of Mirth underscores Wharton's picture of a rootless society. We glimpse Lily Bart for the first time "in the act of transition between one and another of the country-houses which disputed her presence after the close of the Newport season."² Lily is physically as well as psychologically homeless. Her earliest memory of "the turbulent element called home" is "[a] house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was 'company.'" (HofM, p. 32) Lily is described as "a water-plant in the flux of the tides," (HofM, p. 57) a rootless condition borne out by the progression of settings in the novel, each more transient than the last. She is pictured first at Bello-mont, the country estate where she serves at the pleasure of her friend Judy Trenor, completing bridge foursomes and writing notes. In the home of her aunt, Julia Peniston, Lily is the perpetual poor relation whose disregard of domestic detail irritates her aunt; she feels "buried alive" in the stifling and unnatural order of the place. Even the furniture in her room belonged to someone else (Lily's deceased uncle). On the night of her confrontation with Gus Trenor, Lily cannot return to such a tomb: "To a torn heart

uncomforted by human nearness a room may open almost human arms, and the being to whom no four walls mean more than any others is, at such hours, expatriate everywhere." (HofM, p. 156)

From New York and its social and financial obligations, Lily flees to the Dorset yacht for a three-month cruise of the Mediterranean. There, as her fainthearted suitor and moral mentor Lawrence Selden notes, she is "'perfect' to everyone: subservient to Bertha's anxious predominance, good-naturedly watchful of Dorset's moods, brightly companionable to Silverton and Dacey. . . . He seemed to see her poised on the brink of a chasm, with one graceful foot advanced to assert her unconsciousness that the ground was failing her." (HofM, p. 199) This volatile situation leads to public disgrace and, ultimately, disinheritance. Lily's next interlude is at the rented house of the Sam Gormers in a social milieu she has earlier shunned. After a summer trip to Alaska, she serves briefly as the Gormers' social duenna before occupying a moderately fashionable hotel room. Even these lodgings are too much of a strain on her dwindling resources, and she becomes the attendant of the undisciplined Mrs. Norma Hatch in another hotel before finally ending her life in a dismal boarding house. As the novel progresses Lily seems to be increasingly coming and going, as much on the streets as in drawing rooms, buffeted by the New York winter as by its society.

The vestiges of family in Lily Bart's adult life are as unreliable and ephemeral as her various habitations. Aside from an

income too small to sustain her, her parents have bequeathed to her little more than a horror of "dinginess." She is the naturally evolved product of a frivolous, materialistic society: "Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose leaf and paint the humming-bird's breast?" (HofM, p. 311) Bred as an elegant ornament, Lily acquires the delicacy of taste and manners which proves fatal to her in poverty. In her childhood "the hazy outline of a neutral-tinted father filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks." (HofM, p. 32) The Barts, like the Wellands, Archers and Mingotts of The Age of Innocence, are clearly matriarchal. Though his family is prominent, Hudson Bart is not more than a pocketbook to his wife and daughter, and Lily feels pity and then relief after his slow death. The fact of Lily's orphanage is not, to be sure, the primary cause of her later decline. The failure of her parents to insure her a safe niche in the social order in spite of their absence is thrown into relief by the contrasting figure of Grace Van Osburgh, who in her ability to "place" her daughters through appropriate marriages, represents a holdover from an earlier era. Lily loses Percy Gryce to the "youngest, dumpiest, dullest of the four dull and dumpy daughters," and she is acutely aware of her deprivation:

Ah, lucky girls who grow up in the shelter of

a mother's love, a mother who knows how to contrive opportunities without conceding favors, how to take advantage of propinquity without allowing appetite to be dulled by habit. The cleverest girl may miscalculate where her own interests are concerned, may yield too much at one moment and withdraw too far at the next; it takes a mother's unerring vigilance and foresight to land her daughters safely in the arms of wealth and suitability.

HofM, p. 96.

In equating motherhood and match-making, Lily echoes her society's view of the primary role of both parents and friends in the life of the single woman.

If there is no one in Lily's world with her interests at heart, there is a rudimentary extended family consisting of Lily's widowed aunt, Julia Peniston, and her cousins, Jack and Grace Stepney. The granddaughter of a Van Alstyne, Julia Peniston conforms to the "inherited obligations" to live well and dress expensively and do little else. She takes Lily "simply because no one else would have her and because she had the kind of moral mauvaise honte which makes the public display of selfishness difficult, though it does not interfere with its private indulgence." (HofM, p. 40) In her abhorrence of "scenes," she harks back to the Old New York of The Age of Innocence. From a flamboyantly materialistic and opportunistic mother, then, Lily is passed on to "a looker-on at life," whose "mind resembled one of those little mirrors which her Dutch ancestors were accustomed to affix to their upper windows so that from the depths of an impenetrable domesticity they might see what was

happening in the street." (HofM, p. 41) Julia Peniston's guardianship is detached and irresponsible, consisting largely of intermittent gifts which allow Lily to develop her already expensive taste in dress. The one time Lily seeks to unburden herself and ask for help and understanding, her aunt shuts her lips "with the snap of a purse closing against a beggar." (HofM, p. 179) In the tradition of Lily's parents, Mrs. Peniston feels the dressmaker's bill to be the extent of her obligation. There is no evidence of affection or concern for Lily; a bank account is thought to suffice. In her hour of greatest need, with the wings of the Furies beating in her brain, Wharton tells us "Lily had no heart to lean on. Her relation with her aunt was as superficial as that of chance lodgers who pass on the stairs. . . . As the pain that can be told is but half a pain, so the pity that questions has little healing in its touch." (HofM, p. 156) If Lily was a commodity to her mother, who took relief in the fact that Lily would redeem her financial losses with her beauty, she must begin to see herself as an expensive accessory who did, indeed, "cost a great deal to make." (HofM, p. 7)

Jack Stepney is an interesting analogue for Lily Bart. Their motives are identical, but Jack is not hindered by the discreet sensibilities which plague the finest flower in the house of mirth. In the courtship of Jack Stepney and Gwen Van Osburgh Lily is disturbed by a "caricature" of her own pursuit of Percy Gryce. Both Jack and Lily pursue uninteresting partners for the sake of a comfortable fortune. In spite of the kinship, both hereditary and

psychological, between Lily and Jack, he is one of her coldest critics. When Lily appears in a revealing gown for the tableaux vivants at the Brys', Jack's response is to consider speaking to his cousin Julia about Lily's indiscretion. After Lily is cast off the Dorset yacht, he reluctantly agrees to put her up for the night with the stipulation that she leave early, before his wife awakens.

In terms of her role in Lily's demise, Grace Stepney is the prime mover in this parody of family. Wharton carefully details the wounding indifference of Lily to her cousin and the resulting hatred which Grace feels for Lily. "Grace Stepney's mind was like a kind of moral fly-paper, to which the buzzing items of gossip were drawn by a fatal attraction, and where they hung fast in the toils of an inexorable memory." (HofM, p. 129) Grace is the purveyor of Lily's indiscretions to her Aunt Julia, and the ultimate cause of her disinheritance. Like Jack Stepney, Grace claims to be motivated by "family feeling," while actually bringing Lily ever closer to doom. While Lily flees from financial worries to the Dorset yacht, Grace is dutifully attentive to the nervous, ailing Julia Peniston, providing assistance with domestic matters and up-to-date news of Lily's disgrace. With the reading of her Aunt Julia's will, Lily's fate is sealed. Not only is the will symbolic of her final break with her family; in losing the fortune she loses the means to an independent--and moral--existence. Repudiated by family, she is left to the lower minions of society for whatever use they choose to make of her and, ultimately, abandoned.

Lily's increasingly depraved roles in her descent through the circles of society are perversions of true friendship (in her alliance with Bertha Dorset to appease a deceived husband) and social responsibility (in her tenure as the custodian of the social infant Norma Hatch), as her family is a mockery of traditional concepts of guardianship and devotion. Though there are many perverse twists of fate in Lily's decline, it is clear from the beginning that her world is malignant and that unless she plays its games, she will not survive. She is unsuited to her position, not as much by her expensive tastes and horror of dinginess as by her moral incorruptibility. In sexual and financial matters, Lily Bart belongs in May Archer's generation: she is incapable of sham emotion or blackmail. She is the social enigma whose impeccable manners actually reflect a true image of the inner self. A generation earlier, there would have been some provision made for such a black sheep, as Ellen Olenska and Regina Beaufort are sustained even as they are banished from society in The Age of Innocence.

In sharp contrast to this lonely, modern heroine with her "antique" sense of honor is the star of the Club Box, Newland Archer, so solidly entrenched in the ways of Old New York and the will of his family that deviation from the prescribed path is impossible. The Age of Innocence opens in the early Seventies, the decade which saw Edith Wharton's coming of age and entrance into New York society. Its epilogue takes place some thirty-five years

later in Paris in 1907, when Archer is 57 years old. This was precisely Wharton's age when she finished writing the novel in 1919. In no other work did she recreate so faithfully her own background and even family. "I am steeping myself in the nineteenth century," she wrote to her friend Sara Norton as she worked on the novel, "which is such a blessed refuge from the turmoil and mediocrity of today--like taking sanctuary in a mighty temple."³ Similarities between the New York of Wharton's youth as revealed in her autobiography and the New York she creates in fiction are numerous: the small, inter-related aristocracy over which five or six families hold dominion, the dilettante gentlemen who disdain "business" and pay homage to "the ladies, God bless 'em," the rituals and rites of passage which mark time for the leisure class. "Social amenity and financial incorruptibility"⁴ were the distinguishing virtues of her society, and they, along with the imperative "good manners" and the avoidance of "scenes," are the hallmarks of Newland Archer's world. Sillerton Jackson, the gossipy arbiter of taste and manners and the authority on "family" in this insular society, divides New York into "the two great fundamental groups of the Mingotts and Mansons and all their clan, who cared about eating and clothes and money, and the Archer-Newland-van-der-Luyden tribe, who were devoted to travel, horticulture and the best fiction, and looked down on the grosser forms of pleasure."⁵ Behind the union of Newland Archer and May Welland stands the collected authority of the entire "tribe," and Wharton means us to understand that Archer's desertion of his wife would shake the foundations of his

society.

Gary Lindberg has noted the abundance of "allusions to primitive tribes and evolutionary development" in Wharton's writings. "Far from ridiculing local behavior," he argues, "these references suggest its awesome significance: 'what was or was not "the thing" played a part as important in Newland Archer's New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago.'"⁶ It follows that old New York is even more matriarchal than the society in The House of Mirth. Reigning over the two clans are the jolly, corpulent Catherine Spicer Mingott and the austere, condescending Louisa van der Luyden. Blake Nevius has noted the similarity between this matriarchy and both James' and Wharton's views of aristocratic French society: "There too we encounter the formidable old dowagers, narrowly devoted to the ideal of la famille and, secondly, the clan, and managing . . . to symbolize with immense force the authority residing in the concept of a traditional society."⁷

As the progressively rootless and precarious condition of Lily Bart is revealed in successively more tenuous settings, so the gradual alienation of Newland Archer from the society in which he is initially so comfortable is depicted against the background of public rituals which are fraught with significance for insiders: the opera, the dinner party, the wedding, the archery contest. These occasions are staid, regimented, and predictable; there is none of the flamboyance and ostentation that mark the tableaux vivants and bridge parties of Lily Bart's world. The

opening scene at the opera provides a brilliant exposition of the society of old New York. Newland Archer, who approves of unwritten social codes and family solidarity, is compelled to arrive late, because it is not "the thing" to be on time. Wharton adds, "He had dawdled over his cigar because he was at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization." (AofI, p. 4). Archer's personality and social niche are captured in these telling details. He feels he must be the first guest to enter the Mingott opera box in a display of family solidarity on the night that Ellen Olenska--the cousin of his betrothed, but a woman tainted by her "foreignness" and her separation from her husband--is re-introduced to New York society. Later on the same evening, after their engagement has been announced, Archer shows his pleasure in May Welland's innocence: "Nothing about his betrothed pleased him more than her resolute determination to carry to its utmost limit that ritual of ignoring the 'unpleasant' in which they had both been brought up." (AofI, p. 26)

Although he has already begun to serve as Ellen Olenska's protector--and, concurrently, to question the advantages of May's innocence--Archer is delighted with the heightened awareness that cements his society at the van der Luyden's dinner party early in the novel. "It pleased Archer to think that only an old New Yorker could perceive the shade of difference (to New York) between being merely a Duke and being the van der Luyden's Duke. . . . It was for just such distinctions that the young man cherished his old New York even while he smiled at it." (AofI, p. 62) As a cousin

to the van der Luydens, Archer has persuaded them to include Ellen in their guest list and thereby stem the tide of disapproval being mounted against the Mingott-Welland clan. His indulgence of old New York is increasingly offset, however, by his delight in Ellen Olenska's unconventionality and foreignness; "it was undeniably exciting to meet a lady who found the van der Luyden's Duke dull, and dared to utter the opinion." (AofI, p. 64)

The wedding of Newland Archer and May Welland is exemplary of the foremost ritual of old New York, "a rite that seemed to belong to the dawn of history." (AofI, p. 179) Archer has enthusiastically filled a number of roles in similar rites, yet his attitude toward his own initiation into "the family" is one of distracted bewilderment. "Reasonably sure of having fulfilled all his obligations," he likens the assemblage to a first night at the opera: "all the same faces in the same boxes (no pews)." All the considerations of "Good Form" now seem to him "a nursery parody of life. . . . Yet there was a time when Archer had had definite and rather aggressive opinions on all such problems, and when everything concerning the manners and customs of his little tribe had seemed to him fraught with world-wide significance." (AofI, pp. 179-80, 181, 182) Archer's emotional detachment from the pomp and ceremony renders the proceeding, in his eyes, mere empty ritual, no more meaningful than a first night at the opera. The symbolic rites of old New York have lost meaning for him because his "real" life lies beyond the tribe, with the Countess Olenska.

The Newport Archery Club's August meeting at the Beauforts'

is as much a part of New York's social calendar as are operas, dinner parties, and weddings. This is the Newport of Edith Wharton's childhood, beautifully recreated in A Backward Glance:

When the Club met we children were allowed to be present, and to circulate among the grown-ups (usually all three of us astride one patient donkey); and a pretty sight the meeting was, with parents and elders seated in a semicircle on the turf behind the lovely archeresses in floating silks or muslins, with their wide leghorn hats, and heavy veils flung back only at the moment of aiming. . . . It is hard to picture nowadays the shell-like transparence, the luminous red-and-white, of those young cheeks untouched by paint or powder, in which the blood came and went like the lights of an aurora. . . .

Those archery meetings greatly heightened my infantile desire to "tell a story", and the young gods and goddesses I used to watch strolling across the Edgerston lawn were the prototypes of my first novels.⁸

The archery contest builds upon the exclusiveness of the Welland-Archer clan and gives us the consummate portrait of May Archer in her role of young matron.

In her white dress, with a pale green ribbon about the waist and a wreath of ivy on her hat, she had the same Diana-like aloofness as when she had entered the Beaufort ballroom on the night of her engagement. In the interval not a thought seemed to have passed behind her eyes or a feeling through her heart; and though her husband knew that she had the capacity for both he marveled afresh at the way in which experience dropped away from her.

AofI, p. 210

Not one of May's rivals has her "nymph-like ease." She is obviously the supreme end-product of this cultivated tribe, symbolic at once of aloof gentility, domesticity, procreativity, and eternal innocence.

Beaufort's cut ("That's the only kind of target she'll ever hit") indicates his coarseness while revealing Archer's predisposition to think the worst of May. "What if 'niceness' carried to that supreme degree were only a negation, the curtain dropped before an emptiness? As he looked at May, returning flushed and calm from her final bull's-eye, he had the feeling that he had never yet lifted the curtain." (AofI, p. 211) One irony of their marriage is that he has lost his interest in and desire for lifting the curtain; he chooses to read history instead of poetry to avoid discussion with his wife. A second is that she is consistently on target when it comes to reading her husband's emotions.

In the second opera scene more than two years later, the change in Archer's behavior is highlighted by the sameness of setting and performance. Archer has decided to tell May he plans to leave her, and his entering the van der Luyden box during a solo is a significantly impulsive act noted by the entire clan. It is a measure of his desperation and the risks he is prepared to take. Finally, a last dinner scene--and the setting of his last meeting with the Countess Olenska--illustrates the type of family solidarity Archer had earlier delighted in and even orchestrated. Here, as New York bids farewell to the invader, Archer perceives "the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe." He discovers that he has been the object of as nice distinctions as he earlier relished.

As his glance traveled from one placid well-fed face to another he saw all the harmless-looking people engaged upon May's canvasbacks as a band

of dumb conspirators, and himself and the pale woman on his right as the center of their conspiracy. And then it came over him, in a vast flash made up of many broken gleams, that to all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers, lovers in the extreme sense peculiar to "foreign" vocabularies. He guessed himself to have been, for months, the center of countless silently observing eyes and patiently listening ears, he understood that, by means as yet unknown to him, the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt had been achieved, and that now the whole tribe had rallied about his wife on the tacit assumption that nobody knew anything, or had ever imagined anything, and that the occasion of the entertainment was simply May Archer's natural desire to take an affectionate leave of her friend and cousin.

It was the old New York way of taking life "without effusion of blood": the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than "scenes," except the behavior of those who gave rise to them.

AofI, p. 335

The discussion centers on the disgrace of the Beauforts, but Newland Archer perceives an object lesson for himself: "a deathly sense of the superiority of implication and analogy over direct action, and of silence over rash words, closed in on him like the doors of the family vault." (AofI, pp. 445-6) Without so much as a whisper of scandal, Archer is locked securely into his role of husband and father.

Edith Wharton's repository of traditional family virtues and values is May Welland Archer, a character skillfully but only partially revealed through the eyes of her husband. Unlike The House of Mirth, in which a dual point of view allows the reader intimacy with both Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden, The Age of

Innocence is Newland Archer's story, and the reader is challenged to intuit May's (and even Ellen's) real motive and personality. And May continually delights us because Newland predisposes us to expect so little of her. He believes she will never surprise him by "a new idea, a weakness, a cruelty or an emotion." (AofI, p. 295) She is, however, the source of most of the novel's surprises. Newland initially takes pride in her capacity to ignore the unpleasant, but this capacity is shrewdly and selectively exercised in her efforts to maintain her dignity and finally her marriage. We come to know her as a self-effacing, inward young girl; after all, it is only after she has become engaged that she allows Newland to think she "cares." Her manipulative side reveals itself, however, with the carefully timed telegram that advances the wedding date and sets the wheels of social ritual irrevocably in motion. Ultimately it is May who, behind the scenes, initiates the departure of her cousin with the precipitous news of pregnancy and who choreographs Ellen Olenska's dignified farewell dinner against her husband's wishes, thereby smoothing the rumpled surface of society and insuring its survival for at least another generation. And it is May who, at the end of her life, attempts to reunite the lovers.

Newland Archer's degenerating relation to May symbolizes his gradual alienation from old New York. To Archer, May is an innocent, so thoroughly schooled in old customs and values that she is incapable of growth or independent action. As Archer steps beyond the pale through his illicit love for Ellen Olenska, however, he loses the remarkable facility of communication which he so admired

in his wife and his society, rendering him alien and alone, a prisoner of the values he once held. At the opera in the opening scene, May and Newland seem perfectly suited to each other despite the sinister implications of the Faustian seduction going on before them.

As he entered the box his eyes met Miss Welland's, and he saw that she had instantly understood his motive, though the family dignity which both considered so high a virtue would not permit her to tell him so. The persons of their world lived in an atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies, and the fact that he and she understood each other without a word seemed to the young man to bring them nearer than any explanation would have done.

AofI, p. 17

As his relationship with Ellen develops, Archer grows insensitive to the "hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs." (AofI, p. 45) He no longer reads May's signs. An occasional flush or shining eye attracts his notice, but the knowledge that the entire tribe considers him Madame Olenska's lover comes as a stroke of lightning. The fact that they are wrong does not excuse his failure to read their perceptions. Ultimately, his blindness to May is revealed in his never having guessed at her pregnancy, evidencing how lightly she figured in his plans.

Despite her unruffled surface, May Welland is a complex symbol of both family and old New York society at large, and Wharton's attitude toward May is a reflection of her feelings about Newland Archer's world--the New York of her youth. In a comparison with

the Countess Olenska, youthful May is forced into the ingenue role-- which she plays quite well in public but transcends in several frank encounters with her husband. When he presses her to advance the wedding date, she perceives his desperation and asks if he is uncertain of his decision. To Archer, "she seemed to grow in womanly stature and dignity." (AofI, p. 148) As her future trembles in his hands, she finds the courage to face his hesitancy and speak of it, abandoning the "hieroglyphics." She remarks that Newland "might so easily have made a mistake," and might be urging her to marry soon to "settle the question: it's one way." Newland is "startled" by her lucidity. (AofI, pp. 147-8) Months later, May demonstrates the same clarity in the face of her husband's imminent confession of infidelity. Far from offering Archer his freedom again, she denies him the opportunity of vainly unburdening his soul when the pain would be so great for her. At the mention of Ellen Olenska's name, May, knowing that Ellen plans to return to Europe having learned of May's pregnancy, asks, "But what does it matter, now it's all over?" (AofI, p. 324) In this scene we observe more than May's "resolute determination to carry to its utmost limit that ritual of ignoring the 'unpleasant.'" She speaks here not only for herself but for her unborn child, and for the whole fragile structure of old New York. May is uncharacteristically adamant when her husband objects to the dinner party in Ellen's honor: "'I mean to do it, Newland,' she said, quietly rising and going to her desk. 'Here are the invitations all written. Mother helped me--she agrees that we ought to.'" She paused, embarrassed and yet smiling, and Archer

suddenly saw before him the embodied image of the Family." (AofI, p. 332)

May's delayed announcement of her pregnancy is not only a skillful manipulation of the plot, but also a revealing psychological detail. Her cousinly appeal to Ellen during their "long talk" and her early disclosure of her condition--before she is even certain--provide the impetus for Ellen to act. Yet even after Ellen has decided to return to Europe, May does not speak of it to Newland. Hence it becomes a measure of his obliviousness to her and to the implications of his infidelity. Surely such a fact would have been among the many unspoken communications of husband and wife in old New York. When she must speak to keep him from leaving her, her voice takes on the firm sincerity of her earlier straightforward pronouncements. "'But I'm afraid you can't dear. . .'" she said in an unsteady voice. 'Not unless you'll take me with you.' And then, as he was silent, she went on, in tones so clear and evenly-pitched that each separate syllable tapped like a little hammer on his brain: 'That is, if the doctors will let me go. . .but I'm afraid they won't. For you see, Newland, I've been sure since this morning of something I've been so longing and hoping for--'" (AofI, p. 342)

Though May Welland is the innocent victim in this triangle, Edith Wharton's sympathies are showered liberally on all three characters. While May is far more perceptive than Archer realizes, we share his frustration at her narrow frame of reference and her perfect correspondence to the pattern of marital devotion. Her innocence is costly:

This hard bright blindness had kept her immediate horizon apparently unaltered. Her incapacity to recognize change made her children conceal their views from her as Archer concealed his; there had been, from the first, a joint pretense of sameness, a kind of innocent family hypocrisy, in which father and children had unconsciously collaborated. And she had died thinking the world a good place, full of loving and harmonious households like her own.

AofI, p. 348

Part of this resistance is innate in May's character, but another part is certainly the result of her insecurity in Newland's love. But May does seem to have the last word, speaking her sensitivity to her husband's sacrifice through their son, Dallas. "It seemed to take an iron band from Archer's heart to know that, after all, someone had guessed and pitied. . . . And that it should have been his wife moved him indescribably." (AofI, p. 356-7) Archer, in his failure to read his wife's sensitivity and mutual suffering, is a harbinger of the "new ways," as his name so clearly suggests.⁹ He is an arch with one foot in the old world and one in the new. His marriage has been dull but dignified duty. To his son, Archer's martyrdom to the Family is "a pathetic instance of vain frustration, of wasted forces." (AofI, p. 357) Dallas Archer's world is broader, the "flower of life" there for the taking, yet something is clearly missing.

The question of what Edith Wharton wants us to think of Newland Archer, May Welland Archer, and Ellen Olenska is answered in the epilogue to The Age of Innocence, and her sympathy for all three points of view is further illustrated by her comments on her own family in A Backward Glance. Many critics have pointed out the two

sides of the author revealed in Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska: the tradition-bound family standard bearer torn by the knowledge that his conventional ancestral world is a miniscule facet of life, on the one hand; and on the other, the expatriate alienated from the old deities of the hearth by virtue of physical separation and broad experience, and, therefore, a wider vision. But there are also ghosts from Wharton's youth in the central personages of the novel. In A Backward Glance, she describes her father, George Frederic Jones, as unfulfilled: "Arctic explorations especially absorbed him, and I have wondered since what stifled cravings had once germinated in him, and what manner of man he was meant to be. That he was a lonely one, haunted by something always unexpressed and unattained, I am sure."¹⁰ The same might be said of Newland Archer. Wharton's biographer, R.W.B. Lewis, has pointed out the similarities between Lucretia Jones, the author's mother, and the narrowly conventional mother-in-law of Newland Archer, Augusta Welland. Wharton's memories of her mother are conspicuously brief and impersonal; as a child she recalls "the tall splendid father who was always so kind . . . and my mother, who wore such beautiful flounced dresses, and had painted and carved fans in sandalwood boxes, and ermine scarves, and perfumed yellowish laces pinned up in blue paper, and kept in a marquetry chiffonier, and all the other dim impersonal attributes of a Mother, without, as yet, anything much more definite."¹¹ Much more space--and fondness--is devoted to her nurse. She does credit her mother with instilling in her children a reverence for correct language as a reflection of good breeding. Wharton's childhood ambition was to

be, in imitation of her mother, "the best-dressed woman in New York." Her father's "rudimentary love of verse might have been developed had he had any one with whom to share it. But my mother's matter-of-factness must have shrivelled up any such buds of fancy; and in later years I remember his reading only Macaulay, Prescott, Washington Irving, and every book of travel he could find."¹² As Wharton's father's vague longing is analogous to Newland Archer's unfulfilled life, her mother's fastidiousness and distance are suggestive of May Welland Archer and the clan from which she emerges. But May would love to read poetry with her husband. She is, indeed, a calculating and conventional young woman, but Wharton has endowed her with much that is pleasing, and much that distinguishes her from the narrower members of her set. While we applaud Archer's growing sensitivity to the shallow scope of his existence, we are ultimately convinced of the appropriateness of his imprisonment in a dull, dignified marriage.

It is clear that for Newland Archer there is no choice to be made. His life is the symbol of the triumphant lesson of The Age of Innocence: that personal happiness cannot be purchased at the expense of the collective good. It is Archer who first enunciates the principle (which he later, ironically, seeks to overthrow) in a mechanical recitation of the family line on divorce in the face of Ellen Olenska's mute suffering:

"The individual, in such cases, is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest: people cling to any convention that keeps the family together--protects the children, if there are any," he rambled on, pouring out all the stock

phrases that rose to his lips in his intense desire to cover over the ugly reality which her silence seemed to have laid bare.

AofI, p. 112

Later both May and Ellen echo his words. "I couldn't have my happiness made out of a wrong--an unfairness--to somebody else," May explains in offering to release him from betrothal. "And I want to believe that it would be the same with you. What sort of a life could we build on such foundations?" (AofI, p. 149) Ellen Olenska phrases this code, which she has learned by Archer's example, thus: "if it's not worthwhile to have given up, to have missed things, so that others may be saved from disillusionment and misery--then everything I came home for, everything that made my other life seem by contrast so bare and so poor because no one there took account of them--all these things are a sham or a dream--" (AofI, p. 242) R.W.B. Lewis recognizes this moral imperative as the guiding one in Wharton's life: "it was not some abstract morality, but rather the civilized order of life that . . . must never be violated. Like the fictional characters of George Eliot, in Edith Wharton's description of them . . . she shrank 'with a particular dread from any personal happiness acquired at the cost of the social organism.' It is not too much to say that, for her, the fate of society--as the embodiment of civilization--hung upon every important moral decision."¹³ This abiding principle took on even greater significance for Wharton in the chaos and dissipation that followed the First World War. In The Age of Innocence she recalls a time when this code governed the lives of men and women, ever mindful of the sacrifices it exacted in terms

of individual happiness. We know that for Newland Archer there is no alternative to his life within the tribe. He seeks a place where he and Ellen Olenska will be free to love each other without consideration for other people or ways of life, much as Lawrence Selden in The House of Mirth pursues the vacuous ideal of a "republic of the spirit" which holds him aloof, not only from traditional societal codes of behavior, but from profound personal relationships as well. Edith Wharton speaks as a disabused outsider through the character of Ellen Olenska:

"Oh, my dear--where is that country? Have you ever been there?" she asked; and as he remained sullenly dumb she went on: "I know so many who've tried to find it; and, believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations: at places like Boulogne, or Pisa, or Monte Carlo--and it wasn't at all different from the old world they'd left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous."

AofI, p. 290

In fact it is Archer's adherence to his role within the family that enables Ellen to stay in New York; once they have betrayed May, she will have no place within her clan, for her life there will be no different from her former sordid existence.

Louis O. Coxe describes the subject of The Age of Innocence as "the whole question of the old and the new, of passion and duty, of the life of the feelings and that of the senses."¹⁴ Lawrence Lefferts, the symbol of good form in the novel, makes a prophecy of tribal disintegration which is fulfilled years later in the engagement of Dallas Archer and Fanny Beaufort, with scarcely a raised eyebrow.

Janey Archer, Newland's sister, "had taken her mother's emeralds⁹ and seed-pearls out of their pink cotton-wool, and carried them with her own twitching hands to the future bride" (AofI, p. 352); the torch is passed to Dallas Archer's generation. Yet Newland wonders, "the thing one's so certain of in advance: can it ever make one's heart beat as wildly?" (AofI, p. 353) Dallas' casual, almost flippant discussion of the central emotional crisis of his parents' lives makes us long for the old world of deep, unspoken feeling. His easy self assurance is not as attractive as his father's dilettantism.

As Archer listened, his sense of inadequacy and inexpressiveness increased. The boy was not insensitive, he knew; but he had the facility and self-confidence that came of looking at fate not as a master but as an equal. "That's it: they feel equal to things--they know their way about," he mused, thinking of his son as the spokesman of the new generation which had swept away all the old landmarks, and with them the sign-posts and the danger-signal.

AofI, p. 358

The world has expanded exponentially. It is a world of which Ellen Olenska's mysterious "foreignness" was an enticing hint. Years earlier she had shown Newland how small his New York was--had given him a telescopic vision of May and her world in reverse. May's world no longer exists in the epilogue of The Age of Innocence, and with it go landmarks, sign-posts and danger-signals. The new generation, Wharton believes, is in for a difficult time.

Edith Wharton's attitude toward the New York of her youth, a New York which began to change in the eighties, is best expressed in her autobiography.

My little-girl life, safe, guarded, monotonous, was cradled in the only world about which, according to Goethe, it is impossible to write poetry. The small society into which I was born was "good" in the most prosaic sense of the term, and its only interest, for the generality of readers, lies in the fact of its sudden and total extinction, and for the imaginative few in the recognition of the moral treasures that went with it.¹⁵

Though a highly cultivated society, "the New York which had slowly but continuously developed from the early seventeenth century to [Wharton's] own childhood"¹⁶ was not the most comfortable home for the artist or intellectual, as evidenced by Wharton's autobiographical confessions as well as by her choice to live abroad. "None of my relations ever spoke to me of my books, either to praise or blame-- they simply ignored them; and among the immense tribe of my New York cousins, though it included many with whom I was on terms of affectionate intimacy, the subject was avoided as though it were a kind of family disgrace, which might be condoned but could not be forgotten."¹⁷ That society persisted, maintains Wharton, into the twentieth century with the one change being the introduction of "money-makers" in the eighties. But since the ambition of that group was assimilation into the existing social scene, she recalls, there was little perceptible change in the social life of the city. The cataclysm came with the War, following which "what had seemed unalterable rules of conduct became of a sudden observances as quaintly arbitrary as the domestic rites of the Pharoahs."¹⁸ Living in Paris, Edith Wharton viewed the War's destruction first-hand and earned the Legion of Honor for her work with relief organizations.

More than anything else, World War I caused her to look back on an era utterly vanished, not with unbridled love and longing, but with an appreciation of what was good--or at least reliable--in the wealthy leisure class of the 1870's. Of her three major novels centering on New York society life (The House of Mirth, 1905; The Custom of the Country, 1913; and The Age of Innocence, 1920), only the last harks back to the New York of her youth and shows a loving tolerance for a vanished social order. It is the absence of this order in the earlier novels, we come to believe, that permits a tragedy such as that of Lily Bart to occur.

Surely Lily's tragedy would have been impossible in May Archer's era. May's sphere was smaller and highly delineated; it had neither the freedoms nor the pitfalls of Lily's. The tribal link of blood and matrimony is absent in Lily Bart's society, and in its place money determines social conduct. The ethical and moral transgressions of Julius Beaufort in The Age of Innocence would not have been cause for ostracism in the era of The House of Mirth. His socially disgraced wife, Regina, would not have had to throw herself on the mercy of her dowager grandmother. Ellen Olenska's foreignness and questionable marital status would not have rendered her socially dubious, and Newland Archer's marriage might well have ended in divorce. Lily has no better stimulation for the exercise of her grace and good taste than the prospect of economic alliance with a millionaire. There is no continuity within levels of society or between generations. Victoria Jacoby has noted the importance of kinship and codes of manners in ordering the society of old New York and transmitting a cultural

heritage, much as the Church imparted order in earlier societies.¹⁹ In The House of Mirth the unprincipled new arbiters of taste and manners feel no obligation to order their world or to retain an appreciation for the past. The two standards of importance in any community which Wharton identifies in A Backward Glance, "that of education and good manners, and of scrupulous probity in business and private affairs,"²⁰ have been eroded by ostentatious materialism and a decline of moral commitment.

Lily Bart's prison is a gilt cage; Newland's Archer's, a family vault. These metaphors underlie the modes of limitation on individual freedom of their respective societies. There can be no question which mode Wharton considered preferable, even though her attitude toward the American social milieu undoubtedly mellowed in the years separating these works. Lily Bart is a "water-plant" at the mercy of huge and malevolent environmental influences. Seldom does she control her own fate, as Wharton's allusions to the Eumenides and the Furies imply. Gary Lindberg notes the "element of arbitrariness in the public crises" of The House of Mirth, and the "constant suggestion that a larger fate, inimical particularly to Lily Bart, disposes the outward action."²¹ A handful of self-serving individuals seem capable of ruining Lily because she is utterly alone. Just a quarter of a century earlier, the society of old New York responds to crises by closing around the endangered individuals--first Ellen Olenska, then May and Newland Archer. There is never the slightest hint that any one of the clan--not even Regina Beaufort--might be left destitute. Ultimately, Ellen's freedom from her marriage is insured by her

grandmother's financial support. A wayward or malicious individual is powerless against the collected authority of the tribe. Though that authority is frustratingly conventional and fearful of innovation, it is also the seat of all decency and justice in Newland Archer's world. Lily Bart's fickle coterie, acting on individual rather than communal interests, is only too ready to expel an offender. Lily is the finest flower of her society, but the combination of a spirit which dilates in luxury and an "antique" morality which finds the application of economics to personal relationships repugnant, is fatal to her.

Archer's prison is much more of his own making. Though he has missed the "flower of life" in the fulfillment of duty, "Looking about him, he honored his own past, and mourned for it." (AofI, p. 347) There is even the suggestion, in the tremendous passion and restraint of his few private meetings with Ellen, and in comparison of his one great love with his son's, that Newland Archer's emotional existence has been richer than Dallas' could ever be. Dallas' heart will never vibrate between lure and danger. His world is fast becoming Lily Bart's, a modern underworld where the sign-posts and danger-signals have been obliterated. Lily is alone, neither restricted nor nurtured by tribe. The Family, in its nuclear and extended forms, is gone, and beauty, taste, form, art--the deities of Newland Archer's world--are homeless waifs like Lily Bart.

NOTES

¹(Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975), p. 108.

²Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 5. All subsequent references are to this edition.

³R.W.B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 424.

⁴Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 22.

⁵Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 34. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁶Lindberg, p. 8.

⁷Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton, A Study of Her Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), p. 180.

⁸A Backward Glance, pp. 46-7.

⁹R.W.B. Lewis suggests that Wharton may have changed Archer's first name from "Langdon" to "Newland" just before publication to bring it closer to her own middle name, Newbold. (Edith Wharton, p. 431)

¹⁰A Backward Glance, p. 39.

¹¹A Backward Glance, p. 26.

¹²A Backward Glance, p. 39.

¹³Lewis, p. 221.

¹⁴Louis O. Coxe, "What Edith Wharton Saw in Innocence," in Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Irving Howe (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 157.

¹⁵A Backward Glance, p. 7.

¹⁶A Backward Glance, p. 55.

¹⁷A Backward Glance, p. 144.

¹⁸A Backward Glance, p. 6.

¹⁹"A Study of Class Values and the Family in the Fiction of Edith Wharton," DAI 33:2379A (Stanford).

²⁰A Backward Glance, p. 21.

²¹Lindberg, p. 77.

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